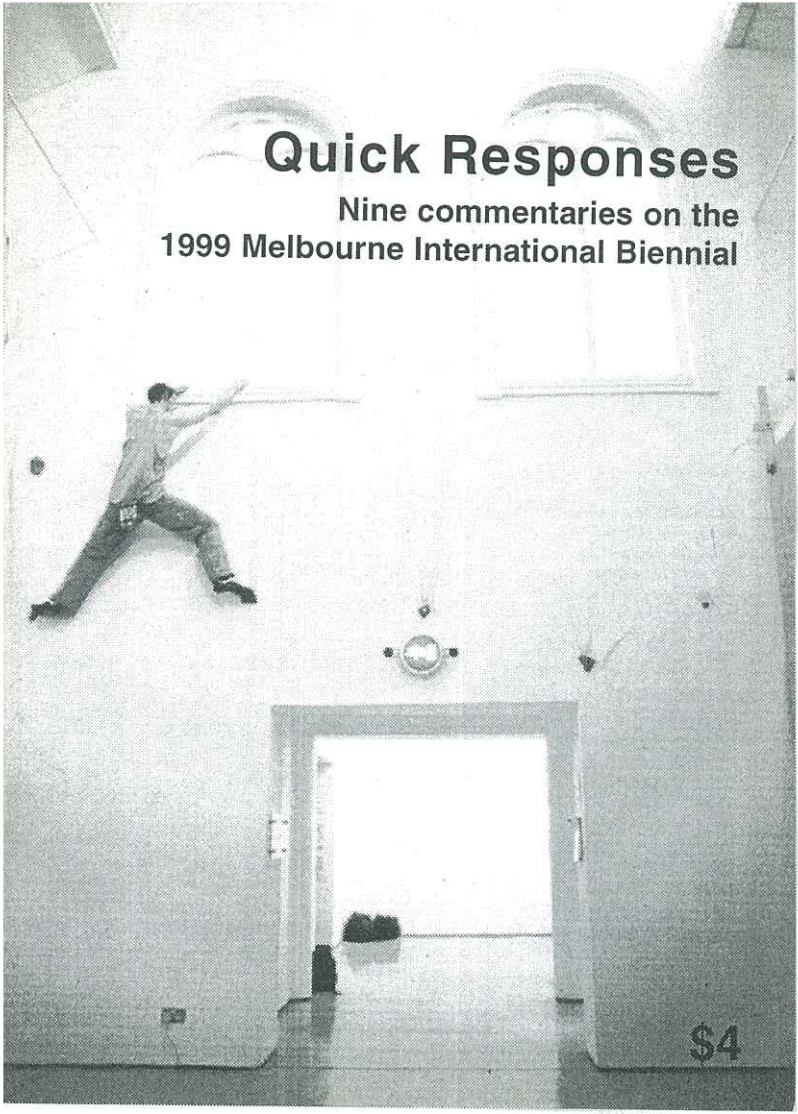
Quick Responses

Nine commentaries on the 1999 Melbourne International Biennial



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Front: Dan Shipsides, *The Stone Bridge*, 1998
Back: Francisco Tropa, *Snail*, 1999

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No Mo Po Mo, or, The New Sincerity

Daniel Palmer

The inaugural Melbourne International Biennial must be judged a great success. With an extraordinary lack of visible teething problems, it has burst into Melbourne with the grace of a gift. Consolidating existing relationships and forging others, for some time now, virtually the entire Melbourne art scene seems to have been caught up in its preparatory tentacles. As I write this, a whole army of volunteers mind the floors, while local artists meet the jet-set. Without doubt, the Biennial is a victory for Melbourne's contemporary visual art scene, as much as it's a plus for cultural tourism, government partnerships and corporate sponsors. A win-win-win situation, no less. And if it's difficult to separate the Biennial from the optimistic rhetoric surrounding the future of the contemporary visual arts scene in Melbourne, already it's hard to imagine that future without the Biennial.

Relevant, balanced and hopeful. These, to my mind, are some of the Biennial's general characteristics. Lest this sound drab, it's all heavily marked by the presence of artistic director Juliana Engberg, whose enthusiasm, as they say, is contagious. Her concerted attempt to move beyond what can crudely be described as the theoretical arrogance of contemporary visual art in the '80s, and its depoliticisation through the '90s has produced an exciting, audience-focused event. We can only hope that the audience turns up.

The central survey exhibition, 'Signs of Life', presents the work of more than 60 carefully selected international artists (of which 13 are internationally acclaimed Australians, more or less effortlessly disguised). Both emerging and well-established artists are presented, in what amounts to a body of work of such size and substance that it's impossible to encounter it all in one visit. While the artists predominantly come from all over the advanced capitalist word, there is a notable absence of participants from countries such as Spain and Greece. South America and Africa are invisible. Asia is reasonably represented (via Japan, China, and the Philippines), while Northern Europe seems positively over-represented,

especially with the separate national pavilions from Belgium, Denmark and Norway. The Germanic weight of Mariele Neudecker's extraordinary alpine mountain model, and the seemingly endless number of Nordic videos has a curious effect (overly-associatively, I initially read this as an unearthing of the Enlightenment project and its repressed other, German Romanticism). Just as probable is that it's a product of happenstance, funding, or Engberg's travel itinerary. In any case, the artists are all metropolitan, based in one or other metropolis around the world. Within this manifestation of global modernity the question of how non-European art practices are located within the continuing history of European-defined modernism is sidestepped by virtue of a diversity of media and plurality of styles (drawing heavily on minimalist sculptural installation and video art, much less on painting) and absence of totalising claims regarding a formal avant-garde. Indeed, only a thematic sense of historicist development persists, linked to the end of the millennium: themes such as migration, the environment, sexuality, the body, and consumerism.

'Signs of Life' is housed in the old Telstra Telephone Exchange on Russell Street, and spread over some eight semi-gutted floors. As we wander the building, we're made fully aware that we're in borrowed time. The conditions of its loan (from 118 Russell Street Pty Ltd) literalise the link between capitalism's logic of creative destruction – in this case an 'urban initiative' in the form of the transformation of former public communications infrastructure into private inner-city apartments. In the foyer a large-scale model display and surrounding posters previsualise the building's blue-skyed future. Just as the display toilet came in handy at the artists' party the night before, the first thing I encountered on my first Saturday morning visit was a billowing red flag on the side of the building reading "Inspect Today" and a suit pacing back and forth with his mobile phone. "Is it a performance piece?" asked the coffee-drinker seated next to me. It seemed a reasonable question. And while wandering around the exhibition spaces on the Sunday, an estate agent would periodically waltz in and out of upstairs spaces with a prospective buyer to point out the north-facing angle and so on.

In this country, the most recent identity crisis of contemporary visual art culminated with Jonathan Watkins' 'Every Day' 11th Sydney Biennale last year, and its failure to capture the public's or art world's imaginations. Sure there was some good work. But in Sydney, art's flirtation with the everyday, its distrust of the visual, and its (ultimately romantic) desires to collapse art into life, as often as not celebrated a contrived triviality. Charles Green was right. Everyday art seemed to inauthentically mirror the banality of its subject. And who wants more banality? With about as much political effect as

the politics of consumer liberation, we learnt, amongst other things, that rather than connecting art to lived experience, simply taking art out of the gallery can sometimes dissolve its impact altogether. The art contingency began to ask: what comes after the everyday? The answer, in Melbourne at least, is humanism, Engberg-style. For Engberg art and life are precisely not equivalent. Engberg has been upfront about her disinterest in everyday banality, and her vision for a much bigger and more important role for art. Not least for its basis in the poetic over the prosaic, art has a potentially active role to play within life. Such faith in art's external causality, its capacity to "enliven the soul" in Engberg's quasi-religious vocabulary, is a variation of what used to be called "consciousness raising". Her carefully worded curator's statement offers a succinct expression of this existential humanist vision:

> Art is still, in my opinion, one of the most effective and meaningful measures of the pulse of life. By its own complexity and search for meaning among metaphors, it delivers to us a synthesis of thought and outcome that reflects our sense of humanity as we contemplate the reasons of existence.

We might summarise it as a sense of our being-with-others-for-death.

Of course "humanity" is a bugbear for contemporary thought with its obvious forgetting of difference in an abstract category. No doubt dedicated anti- or post-humanists (prone to confusing the critique of the subject "man" as an end rather than a means) will theoretically object to Engberg's all too human view, but her intelligence and sincerity are unquestionable. Engberg is a bit of a self-confessed "old humanist" and her curatorial taste is definitely not what we identify as signature postmodern aesthetics: pastiche, ironic quotation, kitsch, nihilism, etc. Her choice of work for 'Signs of Life' reflects all this. But it's not a conservative "return" or nostalgic restoration by any means (despite the press release promise to provide a sense of direction we have lost). It takes history and the critical lessons of post-structuralism on board in a future directed fashion, not in order to sum up the century or present yet more millennial anxiety (leave that to Hollywood), but to assess where we are and to map possible futures. It may be that this fictional sense of community – "we" – is more useful at this juncture than of identities struggling against one another. Refreshing even. In any case, in practical terms, why oppose this positive vision for the products of creative human endeavour?

'Signs of Life' is obviously a broad umbrella. In essence, the celebrated term, "life", refers to an intangible – or at least unrepresentable – vitality, and thus too of mortality. At the same time, it's simply code for the social conditions of existence. There are of course many political dia-

logues in the show, but if it's possible to make a general claim, what 'Signs of Life' offers is a politics of collective hope. Humility rules, pretentiousness is out – right down to the spelling of the word Biennial itself (which also serves to distinguish Melbourne from Sydney). Stale art-political questions that until recently preoccupied us – of art institutional structures, of art as an hermetic European dialogue, and of "good" and "bad" representations –are bracketed in this bold attachment to the social fictions embodied by the larger "we". A direct effect of this is to return agency to the artist – an accidental casualty of their demotion as geniuses – and to give artistic creations a more noble, quasi-visionary role. In a radio interview, Engberg appropriately dubs this a "rebirthing the artist". Clearly, she genuinely values art for what it might teach us in its transformations and defamiliarisations of the world-taken-for-granted. So the artists in 'Signs of Life' are not playing dumb: we see little evidence here of the naïve philistine style characteristic of YBAs of the early-to-mid '90s. In general, the work is sophisticated and theoretically informed, but thankfully, most of it does not need supporting text for its impact. Overall, 'Signs of Life' is a generous set of communicative expressions that engage the viewer in an embodied and critical way, both sensibly and intelligibly. The majority of work is accessible and memorable without being emptied of content. They entertain, but few of the works are content with being mere entertainment. With a clever balance of crowd pleasing and more difficult work, 'Signs of Life' buries the myth that contemporary art is too hard.

Robert Gober's suitcase-cum-drain-paradise stands right at the conceptual and experiential heart of 'Signs of Life' and indeed synthesises Engberg's vision. Of this most recognisable piece in the exhibition she writes with great fin-de-millennium passion and eloquence: "when we have much social, economic, environmental and political baggage to unpack, Gober's Untitled provides both a message of promise and of caution." The work does not disappoint in the flesh (slides cannot capture the water's movement) and like all good art invites a variety of perspectives and affective interpretations. Laden with historicity and futurity, with it's gentle call to paternal responsibility, we're also offered a clue here as to the, dare I say it, "feminised" vision presented by Engberg. Not only are women artists properly represented, but the male artists are the reconstructed sewing type. The understated sculpture by the other senior figure, Louise Bourgeois – Engberg's "curatorial vanity" – also encapsulates this mood, with its double handed giving and taking.

Mariele Neudecker's expansive alpine ranges modelled in a huge tank of reflective milky water (*Unrecallable Now*), and her equally sublime muddy-pooled pine forest aquarium landscape (*I Don't Know How I*

Resisted the Urge to Run) quicken the heart. I was moved by these beautiful miniature worlds, these mini-magnitudes that stand in excess of ourselves. On the same (loosely nature-themed) floor (to a degree the floors gel according to certain themes or, in the case of the 5th, pink hues and videos) Francisco Tropa's suspended snail may be mildly controversial but it's impact is shortlived. Cornelia Parker's still rain of chalk rocks sourced from a collapsed English cliff resonates with more poetry. German romanticism, the dialectic of innocence and experience and the line between the sublime and the conventionally beautiful are also at the core of Tørbjørn Rødland's ambiguous photographic clichés of Norwegian national identity. His conscious staging of beauty in "nature" is both precise and ironic (the images are reminiscent of the cover of '70s knitwear magazines).

In addition to visual poetics, dialogues with art history naturally pervade all the floors, but these are better explored in the catalogue where Engberg offers clear-headed introductions to all the works. Direct appeals to history proper are made by, among others, Amanda Dunsmore's salvaged Weimar street signs, Destiny Deacon, and Tatsuo Miyajima's memorious post-Nagaski Kaki tree project (affording visitors the sole opportunity to "write back" – oddly enough on plastic labels – and already developing a map of graffiti-like exchanges by the first Sunday). Of the ethnographic work, Andrea Lange's *Refugee Talks* is easily the most poignant. This 30 minute life-sized video projection was shot at a Norwegian reception house where refugees await residency status. The artist befriended the people over a period of months and then asked them to sing a song in the language of their homeland. Seated on a couch, we are not invited to pity these subjects as humans "just like us", nor as the exotic other, but to listen to individuals whose life experiences are the product of specific historical situations unknown to us. The resulting patriotic war songs, personal songs, love songs, etc. are moving not only because of their evident hope and joy, but because of the sense in which the body remembers and is animated by the song. Two sassy young girls dancing and singing to the Spice Girls (miming the video clip) also raises the spectre of the global popular and its impact on cultural survival. By contrast, Gitte Villesen's "exclusive rights" bio-portrait of car-crazed Willy, next door, seems decidedly indulgent – more revealing of the artist's boredom with her own life and search for authentic passion in the Other.

Mature video art is in abundance in 'Signs of Life' (and also makes up the Chinese and Norwegian Pavilions). Those that stand out are Aernout Mik's slow panning of a silent collapsing house, and Smith/Stewart's continuation of their intimate sadisms. Static, another double projection, draws its charge from an intensely magnified sound of the scraping of the sexu-

al other's nape of the neck. But in general, 'Signs of Life' is G-Rated. The only other obvious sexual explorations are Meta Isæus-Berlin's recasting of the Snow White myth in the form of the re-sexualisation of the dwarfs, and Catherine Opie's beautiful photo-documentary portraits of Bel Air mansions and lesbian couples – focussing on American community politics. Informed by the Dusseldorf school, and more recently by a narrative photography akin to Jeff Wall, Opie rewrites the American dream according to moving portrayals of lesbian domesticity. Photography, especially in its new objectivist mode, is well represented in the Biennial (see also the French, Belgian and Italian Pavilions).

Scale models, often in the form of revisionings of natural history, are also prevalent. Ricky Swallow's series of spinning figures are effectively positioned on the top floor on a constructed window sill overlooking a vista of the concrete rooftops of the city itself, doubling the micro-macro effect in the same field of vision. Swallow references sci-fi films, video parlours, museums, disciplinary scenes such as prisons, buildings, schools, and streets, and much more, in his dystopic miniature models with their cute spinning figures. Engberg's interest in the writer Susan Stewart (her special guest visitor) and the miniature, as well as the inherent surrealism of natural history is evident in her choice of Maurizio Cattelan's piggy-backed stuffed animals, and Art ORIENTÉ Objet – whose Dolly-derived wool, and detailed doll houses humorously examine the intricacies of "man's power over nature" with particular reference to genetic manipulation.

Elsewhere, we're invited to wear poetry on our body in Job Koelewijn's flak jackets-cum CD players, and ponder the meaning of Kenji Yanobe's atomic space suit series. Miwa Yanagi's elegant digital panoramas present generic virtual space, vacated by humanity save for identically dressed elevator girls. Chad McCail's surprisingly eloquent social utopian mapping, consisting of a huge plan of the city to come, and twelve hilarious scenes drawn from this future in which "Money is destroyed", "People have relaxing orgasms" and "Roads are dug up". While there are more difficult works (such as Plamen Dejanov and Swetlana Heger's commodified relational objects, or Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler's Kafka photographs), Engberg has chosen work with an aesthetic impact, works with a perceptual immediacy of presence. This is, I suspect, the reason behind the notable omission in the entire Biennial of any Internet or interactive digital art (we only get a whiff in the Danish Pavilion). Admittedly, the computer terminal is an unattractive proposition to most art visitors. Nevertheless, I see this as a missed opportunity, given the proliferation of, say, Webcam art and the fact that the Internet is now a fact of life for the global class. The single hi-tech piece in 'Signs of Life' is Patricia Piccinini's compelling

Plasticology, consisting of no less than 51 television monitors displaying a wall of digitally simulated rainforest blowing in an artificial sonic breeze, and an animated bird which flies towards us. This work produces an interesting tension with the rather clichéd genre of "grass art" upstairs: nevertheless, Nikolaj Recke's clover floor is destined to be a crowd pleaser and there's a fragile beauty about Li Yongbin's organic bed.

I could list a few minor Biennial reservations, largely teething problems of which the organisers are probably already aware: that the nine local galleries hosting eleven curated nation's work (the Collaborating Country Projects) exist in a strangely unproductive tension to the main event (despite parallel themes of migration, the body, consumerism, etc.); that one hour films are wasted in the context of a show this size, and that public art needs more attention. Within 'Signs of Life' itself, one of the effects of this new sincerity, of deference to authentic suffering, and joy, is that the more playful works alongside can appear frivolous. Dan Shipsides' video of his wall climbing, Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset's paper flying out the window in a trompe l'oeil, Martin Kersels' stomach growling stock pot, etc., all suffer a little in this context, while John Frankland's clever gunmetal wall/bench is one of the few unscathed minimalist pieces.

From where I stand, 'Signs of Life' poetically articulates an embodied humanism which does not consist so much in feeling for others, as in enduring with them. In this existential situatedness, mortality is what is really at stake. This is not morbid fascination, but can even be a source for optimism. It's not an individual existentialism, but a collective one of mutual needs that 'Signs of Life' is striving to define. From her republic, Engberg has banished navel gazing in favour of art's more traditional task of instilling a sense of wonder, now inflected with the messy politics of living with others. The art is presented not as the repository of humane values so much as clues towards our ongoing revaluation.

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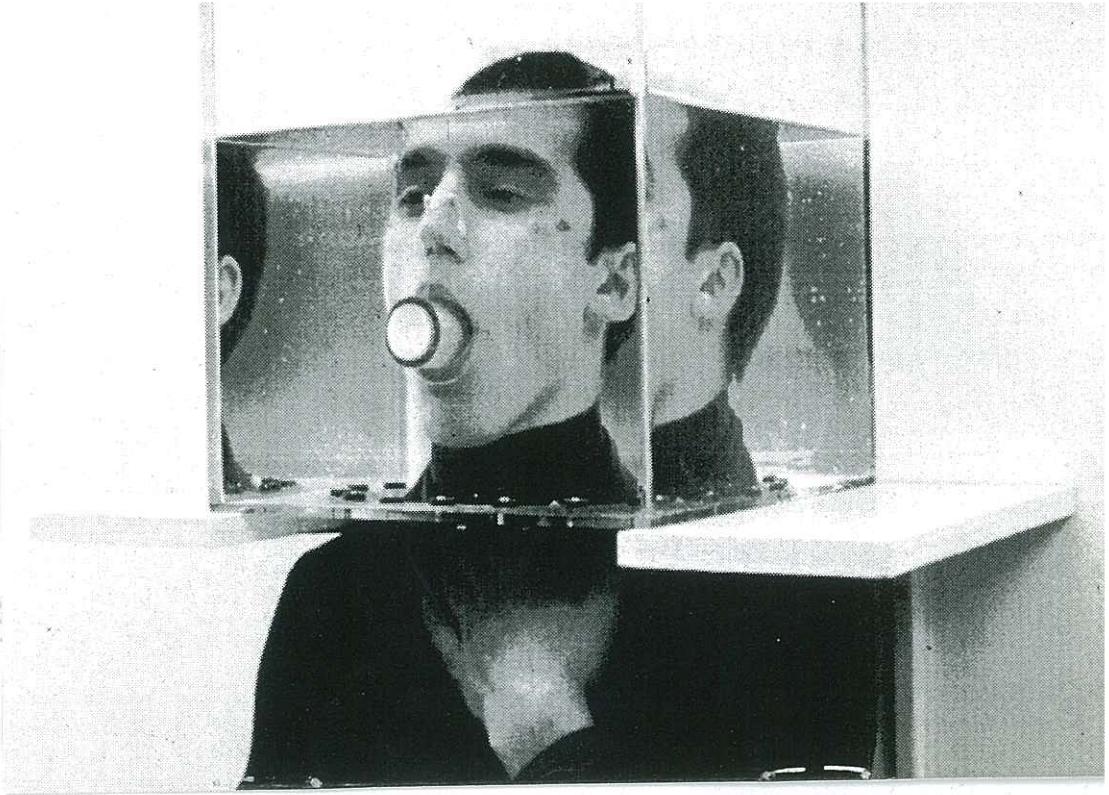
Over: Yael Davids, *Aquarium* (performance), 1999



New Signs of The Everyday

David Cross

Not so long ago critic Fraser Ward writing in *Art and Text magazine* was predicting the death of the biennial concept. Commenting specifically on the notoriously conservative 1995 Whitney in New York, he bemoaned the blockbuster events reactionary agenda, wafer thin curatorial premise, and art supermarket like ambience. In a particularly telling last paragraph, Ward let fly with an exasperated proclamation that cast doubt on big survey shows. He suggested that these exhibitions (biennials) are by now a largely bankrupt exercise. While a little overblown in his rhetoric, clearly the Whitney event had lost touch with its key constituents – artists and writers – and Ward was merely trumpeting the frustration of the art demographic that the Biennial was set up to represent.

Some four years later and Melbourne's own coterie of artists and writers have awaited with a certain trepidation its inaugural biennial. Knowing full well that the concept does not guarantee quality, diversity, or currency, the visual arts community no doubt has been anxious that the right critical standard is set. After all a bland, please everybody biennial will effectively consign it to the status of a contemporary art fair instead of the harbinger of critical and sometimes difficult ideas that it needs to be.

'Signs of Life' fortunately has started off on precisely the right foot. Juliana Engberg has established from the outset that the biennial will be ideas based, and concerned to chart a range of current issues that are affecting artists world wide. There is not an unfeasibly narrow agenda in this exhibition, nor is there a pandering to big names or certain generations of artists. Instead the glue is a cross-disciplinary engagement with identity and history at the *fin de siecle*. Critics may suggest that such a premise is too diverse and open to a kind of pluralism that dominated 1980's art discourse. Yet the exhibition seems to carefully balance a commitment to display disparate concerns while at the same time highlight a range of common polemical edges that are affecting artists globally.

A good example of this is the way in which the biennial addresses certain orthodoxys in contemporary art practice. The most obvious one is 'the everyday' which has occupied artists internationally for the past few years. This area of interest has looked at the mundane and prosaic events of everyday life often involving notions of retro-style and personal taste. Last year's Sydney Biennale for instance saw the exhibition of a shopping docket and other pieces of accumulated detritus that framed identity as constructed through consumption.

While interesting in its own way, the everyday has in many ways been cast as an exercise in narcissism and nascent consumer fetishism. In this sense the notion of the everyday has mostly been framed as 'stuff that affects my life' in a brazenly individualist kind of way. 'Signs of Life' has chosen not to ignore 'the everyday' as *passe*, nor has it simply played it out with a slightly different cast of performers. Instead, it has taken the more interesting path of fleshing out and adding extra layers to this theme giving it a political, metaphorical, and cross disciplinary depth.

The use of the documentary format is a case in point. Understood as a serious genre that presents factual material without fictional addition, the documentary is used in 'Signs of Life' by a range of artists whose dissection of the everyday has taken on the critical eye of social comment. The photographs of Catherine Opie and the video of Andrea Lange both grapple with the domestic not simply as an ironic play on taste, but as a site that is a sanctuary of difference. Their sense of the everyday is riddled with the politics of identity. Opie ruptures our understanding of Hollywood style architecture with its excessive wealth by twisting its conventional signification. Instead of it being cast as a bachelor bonking pad she displays the lavish mansion inferring that it's a home for lesbian couples with children. In so doing she challenges social constructions of wealth.

Lange's video of refugees awaiting residency status in a holding institution also twists our understanding of the experience of everyday life. In her video *Refugee Talks* she has asked a range of refugees to perform their favourite songs. We get an assortment of heart felt folk songs as well as bad karaoke in the form of two young Spice Girl wannabes. While the content may be banal the context is anything but, highlighting the importance of popular music as a source of spiritual nourishment amidst the adversity of displacement.

Music and documentary also combine in Gitte Villesen's brilliant documentary on a local character called Willy. A man with an outrageous passion for life, we see Willy playing out his fetish for buying cars and then quickly selling them. We also get to see Willy deejay his favourite disks.

Flipping vinyl like a master, we get the full gamut of his lifetime of musical development. There's Country and Western, Julio, and obscure Nordic crooning all with their own dance moves overdubbed. To complete the package Willy adds his own backing vocal, loud, heart felt, and incredibly out of tune. Australians make feature films about guys like Willy but in his case fiction would fail dismally in light of his performance of everyday life.

A more intense and micro study of reality can be found in Smith/Stewart's video *Static* 1999. This male/female couple from Glasgow are also documentary makers but of a very different sort. Their focus is on the psycho-dynamics that underpin relationships particularly the ways in which a low level inter-personal tension is made manifest on the surface of the body. Using a dual projection format they play out the same act of tactile scrutiny on each other. In extreme close up, Smith maps Stewart's fabric covered head with her fingers on one screen while Stewart does the same thing to Smith on the other. All the while the sound of this frenetic ritual is heavily amplified (hence the title *Static*). The result is a an anxious searching for something meaningful, a seemingly urgent pursuit of familiarity and intimacy that is never graspable through sight or touch alone.

Perhaps it is a search for the tangible at the end of the century that sums up the biennial. Things to hold on to in a world of simulation and hyper-fantasy, fragments of reality in a cynical and disbelieving world. For an artist like Dan Shipsides we cannot take anything for granted anymore. Even the exhibition space is potentially suspect. That is unless you explore its nooks and crannies by practising your rockclimbing technique. Somewhere up in the rafters, air-conditioning vents, and plumbing one gets the feeling that Shipsides has found something real. At the very least he has found a number of things to hang on to. Whether they are interesting or banal seems irrelevant. It's the sense that through his unconventional mapping of the mundane, he has given new life to ordinary things and by implication to the way we view the not so prosaic world of the everyday.

David Cross is a lecturer in history and theory in Fine Art at RMIT University.

Lines on the Biennial

Robert Nelson

As if adding to Dante, this towering show
marks the steps in which every art-pilgrim must go.
It's a world of its own between heaven and hell
where the shadows of life and the spiritual dwell;
it's a purgatory built out of secular visions
where art goes about its semantic revisions,
where many agendas informing its core
are rehearsed with more vigour than ever before.

When you come into Melbourne and walk up and down
you find numerous satellites spread through the town:
these pavilions of all the most credible nations
give guidance to critical peregrinations,
referring your steps to a block in the centre
where Styx-like, the registers bid that you enter.
Advised of the floors, you ascend to the first
to encounter that 'nature' which humans have cursed,
the example of trees and the wind and the noise
as displayed on TVs like a wall-full of toys.
You ascend to the top of the block in a lift
to get seven more floors for your eyeballs to sift.
You go spiralling downward, from platform to platform
to scrutinize patiently *this* form and *that* form,
bewildering volumes of meaningful art
which entrances the mind and enraptures the heart.
By the end, though exhausted, you're filled with ideas
from delight to bizarre inspirational fears;
there is menace, voluptuous life and seduction,
the charm of machines to assist reproduction,
contrivances built to promote the construction
of notions consigned to a sensual destruction.
The whole of it pulses with cyclical relish
in spasms that sway from the charmed to the hellish;
the whole of it surges convulsively. Flux
is the single motif as it pumps and it sucks
with unseasonal rhythms, inflating and squeezing
ideas about life which are haunting and teasing.

A mighty supreme curatorial coup!
It's immense, well thought-out and high-quality too.
There is nothing to criticize other than things
which uncharitable satire compulsively sings;
they are only the faults of the art of our day
which alas keeps the bulk of the people away:
unapproachable, strange, unfamiliar and weird
an inscrutable cocktail that's hated and feared.
It is true that there's little for my mum and dad
—which I have to admit makes me quietly sad—
but contemporary art has a dark predication
on grim and invidious alienation;
it doesn't seem true if its speaks with a voice
which is popular, therefore the dominant choice
and appears to be larded with mainstream ideas
which the art-world, in turn, both despises and fears.
Let me leave this insoluble problem to others
more skilled at including their fathers and mothers
or rather, to make a most feckless suggestion,
let's keep it for later when that is the question.

Our first biennale, this huge exhibition
can show us our true international position.
It's not by comparing our own with the rest
or to see how we globally square with the best;
it's by bringing the globalized structure down-under
and drawing our insular art-world asunder.

Naively and sweetly, we've always believed
that the art-work is prior and freely conceived;
there is publishing afterwards, based on the fact
that the art has a soul to be published intact.
It is true...but the publishing enterprise rules.
We are only *au fait* with the catalogued schools.
There are artists, of course, who ignore what's in print.
They are slow in success and in taking the hint.
But because we control what gets published this truth
is without an unpleasant or damaging tooth.
There are regional passions. An artist makes way
with peculiar 'backwater' things to relay.
You can paint, for example, do pictures in oil
from which all avantgardists contumely recoil.
When we enter the global arena, however,
imperatives rule and the art is more clever
at staging the looks and the messages too
which the publishing parts of the artworld pursue.

To the innocent Antipodean perspective,
enclosed and conservative, kind and protective,
such shows form a genre that garners the scene
so it matches the look of a sharp magazine.
If the show were in Venice, in Kassel or Rome
and we didn't expect what we cherish from home,
we would simply accept that the choices afford
an idea of the vanguardist art-scene abroad;
we would never have fears that the themes and the look
are informed by the tastes of the journal and book,
that the whole is constructed to flatter what's seen
in a posh international elite magazine.
For Australians to witness the same sort of art
on that far-away soil which has kept them apart
is to feel that they're going where no one has been
in the pages of some sort of slick magazine.
It's as if in a perfect postmodernist way
the museum and journal decided to play:
so the journals abroad would be galleries there
and the gallery here published magazine fare;
it attempted to look international and cool
as it measured its art by the magazine's rule.

Installation, of course, at its cryptic extreme
is exalted, triumphant, on-high and supreme.
Universal, connoting the centre, this art
plays the versatile key internationalized part;
it's projected as being embraced by the world
into which all traditions are summarily hurled;
it's the outcome of all allegorical schemes
that were ever in art for the handling of themes;
it's the language of art beyond image and style
without values of taste or pictorial guile;
it's a habit of making that's ludic and fun
around which clever portents are easily spun;
it has critical timbre and sometimes aggression
but favours elliptically subtle expression;
it's all an aesthetic of objects in space
with the air of an ideological face;
international and easy to theorize and do,
it's the art that the artworld is keen to pursue;
and it's this about which you're constrained to be keen
if you ever aspire to a posh magazine.

But the bias of such international events
is a system that nobody plots or invents;
it's a kind of tradition that happily grows
with a licence that no one can tell or expose
but is set to proliferate, passing from town
to another again with impressive renown.
Now the city of Melbourne joins in on the fun
and though tardy commences its vigorous run.
What it seeks, it seeks well;
it's worthwhile and it's needed.
Three cheers that this project has swiftly succeeded.

Robert Nelson is Associate Professor in Art and Design at Monash University.

Over: Stephen Bush, *Vert Anglais #5*, 1999


BEAUMONT
Mayonnaise
AU TOURNESOL
Mayonnaise

'I heard I'm still alive' (Eddie Vedder)

Andrew Seward & Stuart Koop

'Give me a wildness no civilisation can endure' (Henry Thoreau)

In the sky above the old Telecom Exchange building an early light was slowly filtering through a heavy sky. The gathering wind was warmer than one might expect for such a grey morning and it suggested to me that a storm was approaching – a deep low pressure system pushing up from the south and maybe there'd be a dump of snow in the 'hills'. I imagined the bark from alpine ash strewn across roads by wet autumn gales in the mountains of north eastern Victoria and I walked into the show piece exhibition of the Melbourne Biennial 'Signs of Life'.

Several of the installations I saw seemed to reflect simultaneously upon ideas about art and nature. These artworks engaged spectacularly and convincingly with the conventions and languages of human understandings about art and nature but seemed to be suspicious of offering any opinion about the consequences for human and non-human life of their particular representation of the world. Consequently they spoke of serious anxieties concerning contemporary human relationships to wilderness and the natural environment.

Two main formulations of the way nature is registered from an urban point of view seemed apparent in the work I was looking at. One idea suggested that our 'culture' is not actually culture at all but the logical result of the development of 'nature'. In other words, the constructed world of humans in cities like New York, Jakarta or Melbourne is as 'natural' as that of a tropical rainforest or an Arctic mountain range. This formulation wants to hold on to some essential idea of nature outside 'culture' that shapes and justifies all action. The other formulation declared there is no 'outside of culture' by which it is meant there is no personal or collective experience of nature that is unmediated by the constitutional framework of human culture. Both these ideas abnegate any responsibility for action in the world beyond the activities of people, and to me the consequences are profoundly corrosive.

Our cities are in fact a habitat so exclusive as to who and what they give shelter and tolerate that they represent something truly odd in nature. And

while we may be restricted by our biology and culture to ever comprehend a full picture of nature, failure to value the processes of other forms of life as a result is arrogant to say the least. Perhaps we either think we know what nature is or isn't without due respect to our shifting position within it. Many works in the Biennial seem to manifest a desire to traverse this nature/culture divide, to deliver us to the brink of a natural world, only to fall away into an avowedly synthetic illusionism, finally expressing the gulf between nature and the urbane gallery dweller rather than the close proximity which is possible, even desirable. But doesn't this ambivalence constitute the very structure of longing for the genuine natural and wild referent?

The centrepiece of 'Signs of Life', an enormous – but nonetheless miniaturised – alpine landscape by Mariele Neudecker surely elevates this longing to the realm of the sublime, beyond representation altogether? While the work seems unreal (it's clearly a model) it nonetheless engenders a compelling sense of wilderness which is evidently desirable. Graham Gussin's elaborate wall mounted text marks the same limits in describing the landscape. Gussin's text records a conversation (plain white text against a black wall) with the receptionist of the Panorama Guth Museum in Alice Springs in which he sought the description of a panoramic mural celebrating the Australian landscape. His geographical remove (calling from the UK) is compounded not only by the inadequacy of the painting in representing its real subject but the vagaries of language in talking about the work.

And what an amazing contrast between Patricia Piccinini's breezy hermetic digital video installation and watching a ragged plane tree beating against the window of the first floor space in the gathering southerly wind. I love the clarity of the argument she sets up about nature in this work and her command of technology and placement, but it's a work that in my heart makes me want to head for the hills with some good food and gear rather than the nearest Timezone or another session of *The Matrix*.

The synthetic simulation of plantlife is set in fine counterpoint to the field of real clover planted by Nikolaj Recke. A simple, generous gesture. And if we do experience delight at the barefoot encounter with Recke's work, as the catalogue suggests, what does this signify? The rarity of the most common pleasure to be taken in nature? The absence of grassland in the built environment? Isn't it a sign of our unfortunate dislocation from the source of life? Certainly, Tatsuo Miyajima's treeplanting project redoubles the point: seeds from the Kaki trees burnt in the atomic bombing of Nagasaki are to be distributed and planted around the world, a reminder of what was once nearly lost forever. I wonder too whether Dan Shipsides wouldn't prefer to be up at Mount Arapiles in central Victoria rather than spanning the ex-industrial remains of the third floor. The substitution of gallery terrain for the exposed five-star rocky outcrops of one of the world's climbing Meccas is

certainly a clever turn in bringing our close attention to the environment built or used for art, but I can't help thinking that all indoor climbing is simply a rehearsal for a more vivid, confronting encounter with nature.

Robert Gober dramatically stages this relation between the gallery and an external natural world. As if rallying to the May 68 slogan 'Beneath the stones, the beach!' we approach a solitary open suitcase. Looking into the suitcase we peer through the grill of a storm-water drain to see only the feet of a father and child wading in the shallow waters of a stony beach. Surprising because it's improbable, any revolutionary fervour which once attended the idea of returning to nature seems to have dissipated into simple uncanny delight.

For me, there's an ocean of difference between a snail crawling around the gallery on its own and whether it's made into art as in Francisco Tropa's work. This has to do with the general use humans make of animals in rituals of religion, eating and art. I know it's just a snail and I'd probably squash it if I saw it in the garden but usually when artists make use of animals in art there is an appropriation of the symbolism from other areas of culture. In this context the snail seems to be a small, much derided sign of the vitality which art promises. But while I stood fascinated by the slow beguiling trails of the animal upon the acetate, I was also aware of the abject revulsion and liberationist zeal expressed by others around me.

Perhaps the fate of non-human living things is more plainly put in Maurizio Cattelan's totemic configuration of stuffed animals. It's at once ridiculous and steeped in the historical cultural significance of animals in folklore and mythology. But our contemporary remove from other species, their thoroughgoing domestication to human endeavours, seals the fate of these animals within a deeply ironic register.

The next day I did end up in the mountains once again helping some friends fix a bathroom. There was a heavy snow. After the work was done I wandered into a nearby gully and sat for a while in the bowed branch of a Blackwood by the stream. By and by in the still, late afternoon a cry echoed through the trees – maybe a stray cow left behind in the autumn muster. A sign of life alright but a desperate one I thought. I crossed the stream to try and find the poor creature but the echoing cry stopped and I had no idea any more which direction it was coming from. But I found myself on an old, overgrown road that contoured evenly around the steep sides of the gully. I walked back in the direction of where I'd entered the forest slowly, lingering amongst familiar plants and smells.

Andrew Seward is an artist and co-Coordinator of Platform Artist Group. Stuart Koop is Curator of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

A Surfeit of Signs

Brigid Shadbolt

One of the proposed aims of 'Signs of Life' is to showcase art which reflects our humanity as we head towards the millennium. The title suggests a return to the real yet the show itself reflects a notion of humanity which is largely abstracted and refracted through new technologies. Given the emphasis on electronic and digital images in this enormous collection of international work, the viewer would be forgiven a longing for less digitally-enhanced representations 'the real'.

The proliferation of video installations in 'Signs of Life' may prompt meditations on the screen as the dominant medium of late 20C art. Perhaps this is as it should be in age in which our perceptions of reality are increasingly framed by screens and networks. Nevertheless, one of the consequences of the widespread use of video technology in contemporary art practice is the privileging of narrative, movement and time over image, stasis and space.

Many artists represented in 'Signs of Life' use video technology to mimic natural signs and to make interventions in mass cultural texts. However, instead of replicating the well-worn formulae of mass culture some artists choose to problematise the easy absorption of images. Susan Philipsz achieves this through her creation of disjunctions between sound and image in her work *Susan, Barbara, Joan & Sarah: A Song Apart.* In Philipsz video installation she films herself and her sisters singing a song which has sentimental resonance for the four performers. The same song, filmed in separate locations at different times, is played simultaneously, giving rise to a curious dissonance. Though joined by technology each sister is alone in her performance, as in the family itself.

Some installations – like Eija-Liisa Ahtila's *Anne Aki & God* – play with the notion of personal narrative on-screen. This is the story of a young man who suffers an erotomaniacal fixation on a woman called Anne. The artist has employed several people to play Aki's role which gives his personal story a schizophrenic quality. The story of Aki's obsession is told repeat-

edly with different inflections while a girl lies on a sofa bed near the screens, inferring that the reality of Anne is outside Aki's imaginings. In the same way as Philipsz, Ahtila seeks to reframe the same material with different personalities, thereby creating a dialogue of parts.

The Canadian Pavilion at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art provided a few surprises with Geoffrey Farmer's *Haunted 3.5 (From Hanging Rock to Coopers Creek to Gallipoli also includes Poltergeist)* which is about conspiracy theory, loss, missing time and paranormal events. This part of the Pavilion comprises a homage to filmic texts: *Poltergeist*, *Picnic At Hanging Rock* and *Gallipoli*. The artist-manufactured documentation surrounding these films is extensive, comprising clippings, drawings, scrapbooks and a 'tinfoil table'. This table was set up with tin foil sculpture made painstakingly by the artist using his feet, with a screen showing the process underneath. These deliberately low-tech bits of ephemera display an almost neurotic concern with seemingly disparate filmic texts. By comparing the Hollywood product with the local films, the artist suggests that the Poltergeist might be the repressed voice of all First Nations People. This eccentric intertextual display attempts to excavate repressed meanings in significant American/Australian cultural artefacts. The Canadian artists' playful fusion of art and entertainment may be read as a kind of intellectualisation of amusement.

Psychasthenia 2 + 2 by Knut Asdam in the Norwegian Pavilion is a stroboscopic double-projection which features the image of mirror-glass architecture that reflects itself endlessly. As a result of the strobe effect, the viewer's position in relation to these images of high-capitalist power structures seems to fluctuate – you are at once 'in' the image, at a distance from it and then absorbed by it. This hyper-real panorama of a cityscape is daunting precisely because of the beholder's awareness of artifice pushed as far as possible in the direction of the real.

The spaceman is a vision of a possible mode of humanity that reappears frequently throughout the Biennial. One such appearance is made in David Noonan's *Saturn Return* which uses the tropes of sci-fi to intimate a bleaker future where we are more detached from the earth. The head of a spaceman stares from a video screen at the viewer before succumbing to static. His mocked-up and dismembered spacecraft has a spooky, apocalyptic quality, threatening a potential millenial meltdown.

At the Gabrielle Pizzi Gallery, *Face V* by Li Yongbin presents a screen which is disguised as a window. The static of the screen's surface is punctuated by the shadow of a head which seems to peer through the window at the viewer. The movement of this ghostly figure is accompanied by the

somewhat disconcerting sound of a sleeping child's deep breathing. On this window-screen, only traces of the subject's presence may be registered.

Meanwhile Ugo Rondinone also uses the idea of the window as a point of entry into a different reality in his installation *Shadow of Falling Stars*. Through non-digital means, Rondinone transforms our view of Melbourne by framing and rose-tinting our perspective. As accompaniments to this spectacle are video monitors which play loops of film details which bear no obvious relation to each other. Evidently Rondinone's work suggests alternative notions of the *fin de siecle* but the viewer could not deduce this from the documentation available nearby.

In contrast, some pieces speak for themselves without requiring further commentary. Patricia Piccinini's *Plasticology*, a computer-generated environment with green foliage bending and wind blowing, is easy on the eye and ear even though we are aware that it is only simulated nature. *Plasticology* produces the uncanny and pleasurable effect of being physically present within a 'natural' space and the space of representation at the same time. Ironically, Piccinini's virtual forest of screens is an oasis in the midst of so much visual stimuli.

The viewer of the Biennial, like the much-discussed subject of popular culture, may well be prone to mental saturation induced by the surfeit of signs on display. Many of the installations referred to here are designed so that quickness, powers of observation, and experience are undeniably needed to apprehend them all; yet sustained thought is out of the question if the spectator is not to miss the relentless rush of information. However, a great deal of considered research is required if the viewer wishes to unpack the arcane meanings or intentions latent in so many works. In this way, a high percentage of Biennial participants perform cryptic manouvres which may only be understood in relation to a stated context which is distinctly lacking within the gallery space itself. This may be a deliberate provocation to the jaded intellects of modern subjects but it might also result in an absence of understanding and enjoyment in some cases.

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Right: Ricky Swallow, *Arcade*, 1999

Space 1999

Chris Chapman

The venue for the first Melbourne International Biennial couldn't be more central: a down-town eight-storey ex-office block, suitably 'modern', and vast in a manner that emphasised the verticality of the modern city. From the top floors, rooftops of surrounding city buildings appeared suitably 'artificial'.

'Nature' appeared fleetingly, or it was re-considered, or else the artists realised that the distinctions between nature and culture hardly matter now. A surprise was a room-sized patch of clover, up on one of the higher floors, quietly moist and warm under horticultural lights. Dan Shipsides's indoor mountain-climbing setup, and the video of his performance was suitably human-ised; as was Graham Gussin's transcript of a conversation about a central Australian panorama. Maurizio Cattelan's taxidermed totem (a tower of snarling animals – donkey, dog, cat, bird) sat like something designed for an interior. Not really a trophy, but it looked at home in the vicinity of Anne Oom's domestic set-pieces. Cattelan's work is humourous, and this particular work was startling and strange at the same time. Not Disney-esque, or in the European tradition of hybridised taxidermed creatures, Cattelan's work said something else – maybe not about fauna at all.

Patricia Piccinini's environment of digitally-created rainforest spaces was arresting. It's whooshing noise pre-empting the silence that surrounded Mariele Neudecker's glacial mountian-scape on the first level. In fact, this 'entry' to the exhibition (for those who started at ground level and moved upwards) was impressive and chilly. The 'frozen' quality (even in Piccinini and Peter Kennedy's works) echoed by Cornelia Parker's suspended fall of white chalk rock from the very edge of England.

I was nervous as I approached Robert Gober's work, not wanting to be disappointed. I needn't have worried. Resting quietly in a small-ish space, lit by a single spot-light, the silver-grey satin lining the open lid of Gober's

suitcase fairly beckoned. In the suitcase's base was a large drainage grate (like one from a street), and beneath that a tidal pool of indeterminate depth. Beneath clear water was a tiny world of shells, starfish, waving fronds of seaweed. It's beauty was hypnotic. Peering in from a different point of view revealed the legs and feet of a man, and those of a baby suspended in-between. Like a father taking his child for a paddle, or like he was giving birth. Robert Gober is one of the most important artists of the late twentieth century. This modest work was beautiful, sublime, and spectacular, all at once. It introduced an element of 'tenderness' too, I think. And in this way was somehow 'spiritual'.

The exhibition is vast. But it has its own trajectory. From the ground up, things appeared to get progessively more 'moderne', or self-reflexive. It could have been an illusion, because along the way were distractions; tangents that moved sideways and outwards into immediate and imagined spaces.

Ricky Swallow's diorama's for instance were exquisite and funny. Intricately crafted from cardboard, plastic and altered model-kits, all with moving parts animated by the early technology of the turntable, they played out tiny disasters or scientific experiments – explorations of mind-melding between humans and their relative species (apes). There was always the intimation of subversion, though, of cultures that intervened into these evolutionary 'utopian' (dystopian) scenarios. Swallow's work is complex and the ideas he explores are sophisticated. But the themes of consciousness-transference are tempered (or heightened) by details – a graffiti artist spraying an elaborate tag on to the wall of a fortified facility, invisible to the surveillance above. Swallow's works were placed on a ledge in front of windows that overlooked an aspect of Melbourne's skyline. The distant figures of workers, construction teams, inhabitants, all appearing as tiny and active as the figures in Swallow's works.

There were other similarly utopian visions on the top floors. But all revealing something else. 'Ideal' societies where the will was good, but the reality more difficult. David Noonan's spaceship set was coolly sci-fi and it revealed it's artifice. Stepping through the 'spaceship' door triggered the movie-sound of a pressurised door opening. The entire idea of space habitation was signalled by Noonan's quite minimal constructions – curved white-painted panels, neon-tube lighting. The monitor set into a wall showed a video of Noonan in the guise of an astronaut on a mission to Saturn. The video's repeated climax (I wont tell you what happens) a joke about sci-fi films, but the work was strangely moving. (I've just read Bret Easton Ellis's new novel where the distinction between 'reality' and 'filmic reality' is blurred

to the point of madness. Real places are 'sets', characters are faxed 'scripts'. It's a great and timely book, but, be warned. The 'body' is there in spectacular fashion. Don't forget Ellis wrote *American Psycho*.)

The Melbourne International Biennial is impressive. The old telephone exchange building offers a diversity of spaces that provide an arresting experience (some floors are completely open, on others, works occupy rooms off corridors). The 'pavilions' at various galleries around town act like true satellites, so much so that you could imagine the works all installed at the main venue if there was enough room.

Other works were extraordinary. Off a corridor about half-way up was a room containing two works by Ugo Rondinone. Four white monitors were wall mounted and played loops from various films. Green-painted wood panelling inset with stereo speakers covered the windows opposite the entrance. One central window-space was left, but the vista was altered via a sheet of high-key purple plexiglass. Initially this affected your perception of the room. The receptors in your eyes and brain were momentarily scrambled. Music by the Tindersticks added to the strange experience, always promising a climax, but always, somehow, delaying it. This room was hypnotising. "Look!", someone exclaimed, "the clouds are purple!".

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'You don't have to be a star, baby, to be in my show': portraiture in the Biennial

Lara Travis

Nor is Gitte Villesen's documentation of the daily life of some amiable old nutter called Willie any more interesting than an episode of Sylvania Waters. Peter Timms, *The Age*, Wednesday 19 May 1999.

The general public (and indeed many critics) find the Melbourne International Biennial aesthetically alienating and impossible to understand. So much so that it sends some of them running to the familiar sanctuary of painting, like children hiding in mother's skirts. There they can nurture the illusion that paint is inherently more suited to depicting contemporary life than video and that video is not a conscious and separate meditation on contemporary life but just another part of it. There seems to be a lack of a popularly understood framework to understand new art and this reactionary position is taken to evade dealing with it.

So the art work is not treated with the tools that we have developed to understand it. Contemporary artworks are more steeped in established concepts of art making than is acknowledged. For instance, portraiture is well represented at the Biennial and yet it is rarely described or evaluated as such. To define a work of art as a "documentation" (in the nineties) rather than as portraiture limits the meanings we can get out it. It short-circuits the possibilities for understanding the work of art by taking it's documentary style to be its function. To evaluate whether it is an effective "document" is not going to take long, maybe just one sentence. To get the most out of it we have to ask is this an effective work of art and then assess it with the tools of art history, criticism and cultural theory. Documentation is the style. The genre is portraiture and the medium of choice is video. There is a subject and its relationship to the artist and the audience. Only after these and other things have been considered, should we decide whether it's good or bad art.

The subject of Gitte Villesen's portrait, Willie is a man who appears to be in his late sixties, lives with his cats in a small brick flat and spends most

of his time and money on cars, which he buys, fixes up and sells almost immediately for no profit. Willie is a ham and an eccentric, but he's no star. Yet Villesen's portrait is not unlike a collection of pop-music merchandise – posters, CDs, videos, screen printed posters and photographs. There are no portraits of celebrities (David Noonan is not quite a celebrity yet) or pop-stars in the main pavilion of the Biennial. There are, however, portraits of everyday people, where the artists have gone to some pains in establishing and portraying a close (or at least equal) relationship with the sitter.

Villesen goes to obvious lengths to portray the rapport, empathy and sincerity of her relationship with Willie, yet there is something quite uneasy about this work. She dances with him in the *Willie as DJ* video. She makes clear that Willie initiated the (potentially ridiculing) scene where he takes his shirt off and flexes his muscles for the video. Villesen presents the document in which Willie signs away his right to make any claim on the video after it has been recorded. It claims a level of empowerment for its subject, but as the subject is not the patron, he does not own or have any rights in the exhibition of his image. As with other representations of ordinary people, who are seldom the patrons of their own portraits, from Breugel's peasant satires of the sixteeenth century, to Diane Arbus' photography, questions of power emerge in portraiture.

David Noonan's installation *Saturn Return* is a totally 90's version of the traditional artist's self portrait. One steps through a spaceship doorway and trigger's the sound of a sliding door. Inside there are several moulded pieces to represent fragments of a space ship interior. Fluorescent tubes are set a few centimetres above the floor. On one wall is a printed mirror, *Saturn Return*. On the other a television with a bubble screen, playing the video *Saturn Return: The Mishap*. By morphing the mirrored self portrait with installation, the work also becomes a portrait of the viewer as they step into and are reflected in the work.

Noonan is playing on the long tradition of mirrors in portraiture. Jan Van Eyke used a mirror to cleverly include himself in his portrait of the Arnolfini newlyweds. Rembrandt painted his mirrored reflection in the seventeenth century. Velasquez used a mirror to tell us that *Las Meninas* was painted through the eyes of its patrons. In Noonan's *Saturn Return*, the self portrait is printed onto a mirror. The mirror is no longer the tool or motif – it is now the medium.

Whereas Rembrandt represented himself in armour, to symbolise national pride, and Neo-classical artists portrayed their subjects as ancient Greeks, Noonan represents himself in the trappings of one of the most prevalent identities of the late twentieth century – the astronaut. Since the

late 60's, Major Tom/Rocket Man/Space Boy has symbolised the lone, heroic, romantic human. And the closer we look at Noonan's portrait, the more the pixilations disperse to reveal ourselves. By using the printed mirror, usually graced with the faces of stars, Noonan comments on the way that celebrity creates a yearning (for both the star and the fame) in us all, in portraits of one kind or another.

The video *Saturn Return: the Mishap* enacts the astronaut Noonan's fatal moment. Cut into the wall, to the lower right corner of the screen (where a painter would have once signed) is a group of round perforations, like a futurist corporate logo. Like the video, in which the image of an identity breaks up into pixilations, the signature – once the graphic symbol of a human individual – has been broken into the generic pixilations of mass-media technologies.

Sylvania Waters is an interesting show, and there is undoubtably something to be gained from a comparison with Gitte Villesen's portrait of Willie. But Timms' review, collapses the work of art with the world around it and fails to acknowledge the work of art as separate and a conscious series of choices within aesthetic discourses about late 20th Century life and art. This short-changes the public and the art work, denying them both a commentary of what contemporary art can tell us about today.

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Happy Like An Animal

Stephen O'Connell

I was fascinated by the snails who are doing a performance for the Portuguese artist, Francisco Tropa. They take shifts being suspended (by little clips glued onto their shells) to a fishing line which extends up into the ceiling of a dark alcove. Hanging there, at head-height, the performing snail attaches the sticky sole of its foot to a square sheet of acetate which is slowly rotated and flipped as the mollusc maps this precarious plane of existence with a trail of mucous.

On my numerous forays through the eight floors of 'Signs of Life', I often returned to watch the Tropa performance. I took inspiration from the snail's method of exploring its temporary habitat. Its intricate nervous system distends the columellar muscle to grip the inside of its shell while it turns the plastic field of inquiry over in the rippling muscle of its underbelly. Criss-crossing the residue of its own mucousy memory, the snail feels for the conditions of its life at close-range; from the inside out.

I approached the Biennial in the same way; meandering up and down the old Telecom building to draw different connections between the works; pausing for extended periods to absorb videos in dim nooks and crannies; shuffling back and forth across each level to feel my way through their distinctive landscapes. The exhibition has a delightful sense of layering, with parquetry, corporate carpet, ground and smooth concrete surfaces spreading out different plateaus of sensation. Sometimes natural light floods into the space, revealing vistas of Melbourne's skyline. At other times it feels as though the art works are emerging from dark recesses of the city's architectural unconscious. Juliana Engberg worked with a team of artists to prepare the building and install the exhibition. This is evident in the most stylishly understated ways. It is worth taking time to hang out and suck slowly on the art.

Of course, in suggesting this approach to the exhibition, I'm expressing my own view of how culture emerges and how its vital signs are developed (I have a particular interest in dynamic habitats that build up their

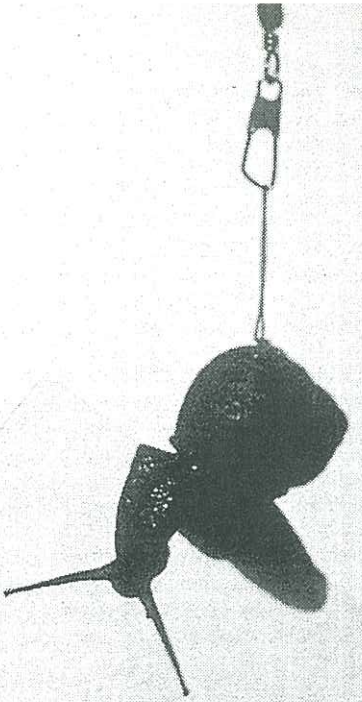
consistency step by step through sensual encounters). Juliana, on the other hand, unravels quite different theories of cultural life in the art of this Biennial. In particular, she places a lot of faith in psychoanalytic narratives, discursively constructed spaces and maternal sensibilities. And, I have to say, it is great to see a curator let her personal style and taste unfold in her work. There is nothing more unforgivable in a curator than being boring, and serving up re-heated concepts or disaffected surveys.

Juliana doesn't, however, make her particular concerns very clear in curatorial statements. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. In the same way that Tropa's snails would find it difficult to explain what it is that is holding them five feet off the ground, Juliana has probably been too passionately involved in her project to step away and conceptualise the whole situation.

The curatorial premise which she does offer – that art is "one of the most effective and meaningful measurements of the pulse of life" – is essentially a broad gesture that is directed toward the general public rather than a community of artists and intellectuals; an argument designed to convince people that art is worth their attention. In this respect, 'Signs of Life' is a popularist curatorial concept which rises to the challenge of establishing public interest and financial support to ensure the future of this inaugural event.

But, having made this fairly obvious point, Juliana's curatorial premise has given her the breadth to make a free-ranging search for art which she considers to be vital for our future. And in the process she has provided a smorgasbord of art for the rest us to crawl around in, and develop our own perspectives on contemporary "life".

Stephen O'Connell is an artist and writer based in Sydney.



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